Chapter VI

LATE FEUDALISM: RISE OF THE MODERN STATE AND CONSOLIDATION OF MERCHANT CAPITAL

Mysore Under Chikkadevaraja Wodeyar (1673-1704)

1. PERIOD OF ACUTE CLASS STRUGGLES

When Chikkadevaraja Wodeyar (1645-1704) took power over the principality of Mysore in 1673 the political situation was highly volatile. **It was a period when class struggles were sharp and raging and feudalism was in decay.**

Firstly, **there was the struggle by the peasantry against oppressive feudal extortion and the brigandish ways of the palegaras.** The mood of the peasantry is reflected not only in Saravagna's vachanas but also in the peasant insurrection of Hadinaru in 1684 and the outbreaks of peasant struggles in the Keladi kingdom during the first half of the seventeenth century.

Secondly, **there was the life and death struggle of the merchants and artisans against the palegara class.** Incessant battles, coercive levies and dacoity of goods in transit must have harassed these classes beyond a point of tolerance leading to their fortification of towns and active resistance against marauding palegara forces.

Thirdly, **there was the incessant and unabating struggle between the warlords.** Internecine feudal warfare was so acute and raged with such great regularity that **it became a significant factor in weakening and exhausting the palegara class and thus of feudalism in general.**

All these factors created a pitched political crisis. Entire society was in ferment; surplus was drained away for war, incentive for commodity production was jeopardised, state sponsored irrigation was at stake, and as a result, famines such as the one which struck in the late seventeenth century devastated the already impoverished countryside.

Chikkadevaraja Wodeyar was obviously under tremendous pressure when he assumed power. He confirmed his priorities by sending three of his ministers as emissaries to the Mughal Court in Delhi, who after their initial courtroom formalities, stayed on for six months to study the Mughal administration and discover the secret behind the success of Mughal rule, which with a territory at least a hundred times bigger did not apparently suffer from the problem of instability and anarchy which Chikkadevaraja Wodeyar's Mysore did.

On the return of his ambassadors, Chikkadevaraja made a historic choice of the classes he would rally with and implemented a series of measures which changed the very structure of the state, consolidated the monarchy and set into motion a process which spelt the dawn of the modern age of Karnataka.

2. ELIMINATION OF THE PALEGARA CLASS AND THE BUILDING OF A CENTRALISED STATE

The situation which Chikkadevaraja faced was similar to that of France between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries when its territory was fragmented, the king powerless and internecine feudal warfare and class struggles by the masses rocked the country. Leo Huberman says: *"The strife between warring overlords frequently meant disaster to the local population, no matter which side won. It was the presence of different overlords in different places along the highways of business that made trade so difficult. What was needed was a central authority, a national state. A supreme power that would be able to bring order out of feudal chaos. The old overlords could no longer fulfil their social function. Their day was done. The time was ripe for a strong central power."* [1]

And this was the logical essence of what Chikkadevaraja Wodeyar perceived from his study of Mughal India. **He embarked on a campaign of eliminating the palegaras *as a class*.** He made new conquests, disarmed the palegaras and disbanded their armies. Regarding the palegaras who existed within his former territories: *"...the Raja brought these powerful chieftains to Seringapatam and gave them various dignified appointments in his household and converted them from powerful chieftains to humble courtiers."* [2] Those who continued to wag their tails were indiscreetly eliminated.

Thus **Chikkadevaraja became the foremost among monarchs in Karnataka to initiate a process of eliminating a layer of the parasitic feudal intermediaries. He did this by wiping out the class itself from the face of history.**

Just as he went about in achieving this goal, **Chikkadevaraja transformed the structure of the state.** The old feudal state, as we have seen, was fragmented and highly decentralised; each palegara and his retainers constituting its nucleus and its basic unit. The king was just as powerful or rather as powerless as any other palegara was. By introducing the nayaka system, Vijayanagara did attempt to integrate the state. However, this was partial and superficial since the nayakas were basically feudal chieftains who in addition to their own cavalry and artillery maintained the army of the king. However, **with the elimination of this intermediary class of palegaras which was a decisive advance over Vijayanagara, which amounted to a restructuring of the polity, the state was also remoulded accordingly. In place of the fragmented warlord state, Chikkadevaraja Wodeyar set up a centralised state apparatus.** After defeating the palegaras by either absorbing them into his civil administration or simply eliminating the die hards, he disbanded their armies, incorporated into his own the best of their fighters. With this, **for the first time a Karnataka monarch created regular army.**

Hayawadana Rao says that by 1675 Chikkadevaraja Wodeyar had a regular army of 12,000 horse and 1,00,000 foot.[3] This regular army was the backbone of the new state. Writing about a similar development in Europe, Huberman says: *"He [the king] could hire and pay for a trained army always at his service, not dependent on the loyalty of a lord. It would be a better army, too, because its only business would be to fight. Feudal troops had no training, no regular organisation which enabled them to work together*

smoothly. An army paid for fighting, well trained and well disciplined, and always on hand when needed, was a great improvement.

Moreover, technical improvements in military weapons also called for a new kind of army. Gunpowder and cannon were coming in and effective use of these arms required trained co-operation. And while a feudal warrior could bring his own armour, he couldn't easily bring cannon and powder." [4]

B Puttaiya writes: *"His numerous conquests and the subjugation of a large number of local polegars created the necessity of enlarging his army and the strengthening of the forts with cannons and guns. He therefore increased the strength of his army...fully equipped with all weapons of offence and defence and mounts, such as horses, camels, elephants and remounts, such as oxen, carts, tents, etc."* [5]

Within a year of the return of his emissaries from Delhi, Chikkadevaraja achieved all this. While he absorbed the best fighters of the palegara armies into his own regular army, **he set up the *kandachara* or local militia with a fair body of the rest of the fighters.** Each hobli had a kandachara of 100 to 400 armed men under the command of a hoblidara. *"Their duty was to keep in readiness weapons of offence and defence including gunpowder shot and to be prepared to fight when necessary."* [6] Hayawadana Rao explains the other functions of the militia: *"Ordinarily it was the duty of the staff of the militia to patrol the unit [territorial unit] and safeguard the local treasury...in times of war they were required to be ready with arms and ammunition. The militia seems thus to have occupied an important place in the civil and military governance of the country, useful alike in times of war and peace...."* [7]

Thus while a modern regular army constituted the backbone of the state, it was assisted locally by a militia which in addition, undertook the task of a local police.

The results of this structural change in the state showed in the consolidation and territorial expansion of the Mysore principality. With the regular army as its nucleus, the principality of a palegara transformed into a modern kingdom with a consolidated monarchy in command and at its head.

In the series of military campaigns that he waged he achieved stunning victories. In 1682 he is said to have routed the alliance of Keladi Nayakas, Sambaji (Shivaji's son) and the Golconda armies at Banavara. An achievement of no small measure for what was a mere principality a decade before.[8] By 1704 his kingdom included the districts of present day Mysore, Bangalore, Mandya, Kolar, Tumkur, Hassan and the fringe of Chickmagalur in Karnataka, and Salem, Erode and Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu. Thus Hayawadana Rao is not wrong when he concludes: *"Chikkadevaraja Wodeyar had become not only firm in his position as the sovereign of Mysore but also an imperial authority in the South."* [9]

While the regular army constituted the axis, Chikkadevaraja organised a bureaucratic apparatus modelled apparently on the Mughal administration but making its own select and progressive innovations which constituted the second major component and thus completed the formation of the modern state.

Around him he formed a five-member ministerial council led by a prime minister. Then he set up the *Attara Kacheri* (*Eighteen Offices*) which was the headquarters of the civil bureaucracy and appointed officials for each department. He created a big revenue

collection and land assessment apparatus. He amalgamated the smaller slices of his kingdom and created 84 divisions within the Mysore state. He also created *hoblis* within each division having from 8 to 16 villages. At the head of each hobli he placed a subadar, under him an assistant, three scroll writers, six accountants called variously as *parpathegaras, dafedars* and *sheristedars.* Then with the help of this bureaucracy he set about the task of classifying the lands, making an assessment, regularising tenures, fixing and collecting the various revenues. He codified the various taxes, 24 in all, and sought their prompt collection. He created the first postal system which was combined with the task of despatching intelligence. With these measures, Chikkadevaraja established a modern administrative apparatus; an apparatus which was to soon prove its efficacy. Not even the most loyal of palegaras paying regular tribute could have helped in the accumulation and centralisation of such a vast financial fund as the bureaucracy was to create for Chikkadevaraja.

Mark Wilks records that: *"It is certain that the revenues were realised with great regularity and precision, and this raja is stated to have established a separate treasury to provide for extraordinary and unexpected disbursements, of which he himself assumed the direct custody. It was his fixed practice, after the performance of his morning ablutions, and marking his forehead with the upright insignia of the Vishnoo, to deposit two bags (thousands) of Pagodas in his treasury from the cash despatched from the districts, before he proceeded to break his fast.... By course of rigid economy and order, and by a widely extended and well organised system of securing for himself the great mass of plunder obtained by his conquests he had accumulated a treasure, for which he obtained the designation of Nou Kotte Narain, or the Lord of nine crores (of pagodas and a territory producing a revenue calculated on the estimate of the schedules...of 13,23,371 Canterai Pagodas; a sum which is no further remarkable than in its near coincidence with the value of the territory assigned to the revived state of Mysore after the lapse of another century in 1799...."* [10]

The elimination of the palegaras and the centralisation and regularisation of revenue collection in the form of a tax instead of a tribute surely provided rich dividends to the monarch. Most important of all, **it placed at his disposal abundant resources making him extraordinarily powerful and an active and effective agent in deciding and guiding the direction of the economy.**

The revival of large scale irrigation projects, such as for instance, the drawing of irrigation canals from the Kaveri at Srirangapatna irrigating hundreds of acres of land, is an example of the impact of centralisation on the agrarian economy without which this would not have been possible. The importance attached to irrigation was so great that the king had created a department for the purpose in his Attara Kacheri and systematised the regulation of water by appointing a Nirgunti or water distributor (normally of a Holeya caste) and overlooked by the Shanbhoga.

3. RISE OF THE OWNER-PEASANT

In addition to providing the Mysore region of feudal Karnataka with a modern state Chikkadevaraja was instrumental in introducing certain significant changes in property ownership among the peasantry. The new state did consolidate the dictatorship of the feudal lords beyond doubt. However, it did so under changed conditions. Mark Wilks has made an apt observation in this regard: *"[The] chief feature of the interior administration of Chikka Deva Raya [was the] remarkable change he brought in the actual condition of the landholders of Mysoor."* [11] **This *remarkable change* lay in the rise of the class of the owner-peasant.**

As a means to increase its revenues the king undertook to expand the area under cultivation. As an incentive he granted revenue concessions for a fixed number of years. In the case of superior land the remission granted two-thirds of the full assessment for a period of five years and in the case of land of medium quality it was one-fourth.[12] This not only brought increasing lands under the plough, but it also began the process of fixing a particular peasant for a particular piece of land.

The increase in peasant private property in land, contradistinct from feudal private property was however most evident among those that served this army. Soldiers and kandacharas were granted lands over which they could claim hereditary rights and they were exempt from making tax payments to the king. Even the 20 types of agrarian taxes, levied on the peasantry were otherwise waived for those rendering military service.

Such holdings which were enjoyed by the soldiers and militiamen was a strong factor in eroding feudal authority in the village. It encouraged the emergence of the owner-peasant. The fact that these were hereditary holdings prevented them from getting pushed back into the tyranny of bondage. Such holdings encouraged the various Shudra castes to raise their economic and thus social status in the countryside and participate more actively in commodity production. Chief among these castes were the Vokkaligas, Lingayats, Kurubas, Bedas, Raja Parivaras and Idigas.[13]

Under Chikkadevaraja a sizeable proportion of agrarian revenue was collected in the form of cash, and the state encouraged this method since it reduced its burdens and simplified its transactions. The collection of land revenue in cash affected the peasantry by initiating its stratification.

4. THE NANJANGUD PEASANT UPRISING

The Nanjangud peasant uprising of 1684, also called the Hadinaru peasant rebellion was a widespread peasant movement against the state which found its epicentre in Mysore district's Nanjangud taluk took place as a result of the exorbitant annual tax and various other levies imposed on the peasantry. Hadinaru moreover was the original seat of the Wodeyar dynasty. As a mark of protest the peasantry hung ploughs upside down on peepal trees at village squares. The king, in an apparent move of holding talks with its leaders, several of whom were Lingayat Jangamas, is said to have killed all those who participated; with estimates ranging from 400 to 1,000 as having been eliminated. Soon afterwards he is said to have deployed his loyal cavalry and other troops on the peasantry who had gathered to protest. The clampdown was most brutal and the resistance succumbed to Chikkadevaraja's offensive.

Fed up with palegara extortions, the peasantry had already begun to combine, by the end of the period of middle feudalism, against this class of warlords. But although vexatious palegara extortions had ended with Chikkadevaraja's elimination of this class, and thus won him their support, he used his newfound monopoly to fleece the peasantry which reminded them of the severity of the former palegaras. Angered by this, with a living memory of successful anti-palegara uprisings, and having gained the support of former palegaras pensioned off in Srirangapatna and that of the Virashaiva priesthood which was compelled to pay a religious tax, the peasantry broke out in rebellion.

It is important to note that it was widespread, covering the central part of the kingdom. It signified a new development, in that it expressed the ability of the peasantry to coordinate and launch an uprising covering extensive territory.

The anger of the peasantry reverberated throughout the Mysore kingdom long after the movement was suppressed, by the assassination of Chikkadevaraja's prime minister, Vishalaksha Pandit, who had earned the wrath of the peasant masses and the Jangama priesthood for his role in the campaign to annihilate the movement.[14]

Irfan Habib said of a similar movement launched in Mughal India: *"Heavy taxation ...greatly affected agriculture; but, conversely, a decline in agriculture caused a corresponding fall in land revenue. It was therefore, an inevitable paradox that Muhammad Tughluq, who provoked an agrarian rebellion of unprecedented intensity by increasing taxation, should be the very first ruler to formulate a systematic policy of promoting agriculture."* [15]

This is something that Chikkadevaraja Wodeyar must have surely realised. Even his successors learnt from this and sought to reform agriculture, with fresh vigour and intensity.

5. ALLIANCE BETWEEN MERCHANT AND KING

The coming to power of Chikkadevaraja Wodeyar and the creation of a modern state, albeit eliminating the palegara layer of feudalism only, led to the consolidation of the landlord class at the village level. However, the changes that the monarch introduced were not of advantage to the local landlord class alone. **Almost every new measure which Chikkadevaraja introduced not only earned the support of the merchant classes, but in fact, he drew up these measures with their backing and their benefit in mind.**

A. Fallout of Palegara Elimination

The hope for further development of the merchant class was frustrated by the rise of the palegaras. The merchants and artisans with the help of their Left and Right Hand associations waged a sustained battle against the hurdle created by the palegara class. They were definitely looking forward to the elimination of the palegaras and must have extended their fullest support to Chikkadevaraja in his campaign against them. The end to social chaos was a great relief to the merchant class since trade once again revived.

B. A *Santhe* for Each Hobli

The hobli which was formed for every eight to 16 villages was not merely an administrative division or a unit for revenue collection. The hobli was both of these only because of the economic ties it had developed with those 8 to 16 villages. **The santhe had created these ties out of which the hobli emerged as a suitable unit.** The proliferation of commodity production in Chikkadevaraja's time saw the existence of a few hundred santhes at least. **The collection of the entire state tax in cash,** which was a new development over that of Vijayanagara, stood testimony to this. The spread of the santhe across the countryside and its proximity to a rising class of owner-peasants not only spoke of the continued integration of the peasant but also a multiplication in the fortunes of the trader.

The big traders must have participated in these santhes through smaller middlemen thus drawing together the farthest villages with the cities.

C. Standardisation of Weights, Measures and Coins

B Puttaiya writes: *"Finding that weights and measures were not uniform but were much abused, he fixed the standard of each and caused the monogram of his name, the letter `de' [for Devaraja in Kannada] to be impressed on each and ordered that all weightments and measurements should be made in these approved weights and measures as a safeguard against fraud. Similarly he caused seals bearing the monogram `de' to be kept in the custody of local officials to be used whenever necessary for sealing purposes."* [16]

Although Chikkadevaraja did not introduce any new coins, it was he who popularised the Kantheraya Pagoda.

By standardising weights, measures and coinage Chikkadevaraja was only replacing a feudal set of measures with a system which favoured a mercantile economy. The

need to maintain innumerable records of transactions and conversions was a hurdle to the big merchant class which was linked up with producers and customers in localities having differing systems of weights, measures and coinage. Thus the standardisation, whereby common measures were introduced, greatly helped the rising business class, more than any other.

D. Territorial Expansion and Expansion of the Market

The new conquests and the territorial expansion of the kingdom was to the advantage of the merchant class. In fact the fragmentation of the market since the collapse of Vijayanagara and then the fall of the Adil Shahis delivered a big blow to the rising merchant class. The new expansion of the Kingdom of Mysore under the Wodeyar revived the hope of once again expanding the prospects of an extended market for the mercantile class. It would not have been surprising if the merchants had funded these expansionist campaigns capable of fetching them a consolidated market.

E. Purchase of Bangalore

In what was an act without parallel, Chikkadevaraja purchased Bangalore from Khasim Khan, an officer under Aurangzeb, for three lakh Pagodas, which would not have been possible except for a king at the charge of a centralised state who had at his disposal the entire revenues that his kingdom coughed up. After its purchase, Puttaiyya says: *"The Raja thereupon improved the place, built a fort and a shop street, imported a large industrial population, such as the weavers, arranged for the safety of the town and made it a big cloth centre for the export of cotton goods to all parts of the territories."* [17]

The merchant class dealing in textiles, the Pancham Banajiga, was clearly on the rise. It had by now perhaps replaced the Salu Mule Banajiga and had encouraged Chikkadevaraja with the prospects that Bangalore held for the cotton textile industry. In developing Bangalore, it is clear as to which class the Wodeyar was acting in concert with.

F. Creation of New Urban Centres

While the santhes were weekly rural markets, Chikkadevaraja also set up many urban ones. While Bangalore was one, there were several others too. *"It was in Chikkadevaraja's time that the building of towns with divisions and shop centres was taken up on an extensive scale to deal with merchandise and to provide with settlements for the industrial population. He strengthened the fortresses he had won from the poligars, built towns round them and constructed high streets and shop centres therein and arranged for the weighing and selling of goods in these centres before they were transported to the interior for being sold in retail. It is interesting to note that Bangalore, Gubbi and Turuvekere were among the first towns so organised by him. As a result of the establishment of these centres, trade developed and the raja found an opportunity to tap fresh sources of revenue and forthwith introduced the octroi system of collecting revenue on all marketable articles, such as cloth, drugs, tobacco and similar articles and entertained an establishment for collection work."* [18]

The new urban centres that Chikkadevaraja built were manned by the artisans who continued to increasingly dissociate themselves from agriculture in growing numbers with each passing day.

That, in constructing these urban centres, the king had laid special emphasis in catering to the needs of the merchant class first, is evident from the quotation above.

G. The Sat-Shudra Srivaishnavite

The Mysore Wodeyars converted to Srivaishnavism from Shaivism while they still were feudatories paying a tribute to the Vijayanagara nayaka at Srirangapatna. Theirs was a classic case of *feudalism from below.*

Between 1687-1690 Chikkadevaraja wrote *Sachchudraachara Nirnaya* in Kannada. In this work he levels the differences between the Brahmanas and Shudras by elaborating on the concept of *Sat Shudras*.

Apart from these influences, which are important to us because they describe the world-view of the king, who, changing with the times, carried with him strong concepts favouring a reform of the caste system by elaborating on such notions as Sat-Shudra and a reform of feudalism by upholding Tengalai Srivaishnavism which, although feudal basically, increasingly rallied with the merchant and artisan castes in an attempt to accommodate them. These changed cultural norms had a strong effect in putting an end to sati. There are many gory instances described by the various foreign travellers to Keladi and Hampi who were eyewitness to the very performance of sati by women of the property owning classes. However, Chikkkadevaraja was the first in the Wodeyar dynasty who convinced his wives not to bury themselves in his grave on his death. And, these instructions were followed. The king's tastes, ideas and cultural values were indeed loosing rigid feudal contours and accommodating those of a merchant class.

H. Focus Shifts to the South

In the twelfth century, with the rise in commodity production, it was the Dharwad-Shimoga-Bijapur belt, with Bidar emerging towards the end, that served as the trend setter, determining the political, economic and cultural direction of Karnataka. From the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, while Shimoga and Dharwad lost out, Bijapur held on with Bellary, Bidar and Gulburga as the new centres providing the general direction of historical development for Karnataka. With the defeat and devastation of Bijapur and after the palegara relapse, the rise of Chikkadevaraja Wodeyar shifted the focus to the Srirangapatna-Bangalore axis, as **it contained the most forward looking orientation, since the interests of the modern state and the mercantile class had fused. It was this region which forged the progressive alliance between the king and the merchant, transforming the feudal king into a patron of mercantilism at the same time.**

On the other hand, during the same period, on the coast of Karnataka, a different alliance was being beaten out; an alliance of reaction between colonialism, feudalism and comprador merchant capital. In the century that remained after Chikkadevaraja Wodeyar's death, these two tendencies; one led by colonialism and the other by mercantile nationalism were to draw swords in a saga of valour which the masses and leaders of Karnataka were to display.